The auteur theory was never, in itself, a theory of the cinema, though its originators did not claim that it was. The writers of Cahiers du Cinéma always spoke of 'la politique des auteurs'. The translation of this into 'the auteur theory' appears to be the responsibility of Andrew Sarris. In an essay entitled 'Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962' he remarked, 'Henceforth, I will abbreviate "la politique des auteurs" as the auteur theory to avoid confusion.' Confusion was exactly what followed when the newly christened 'theory' was regarded by many of its supporters and opponents alike as a total explanation of the cinema.

Not only was the original politique of Cahiers somewhat less than a theory; it was itself only loosely based upon a theoretical approach to the cinema which was never to be made fully explicit. The politique, as the choice of term indicates, was polemical in intent and was meant to define an attitude to the cinema and a course of action. In the pursuit of this course Cahiers did inevitably reveal some of the theory on which the politique was based; but usually this appeared incidentally, and at times incoherently.

One thing is clear, however. From the beginning Cahiers, and its predecessor La Revue du Cinéma, were committed to the line that the cinema was an art of personal expression. (In the second issue of La Revue an article appeared entitled: *La création doit être l'ouvrage d'un seul*). At that period (the late 1940s) it was inevitable that part of the project of a new film magazine would be to raise the cultural status of the cinema. The way to do this, it seemed, was to advance the claim of the cinema to be an art form like painting or poetry, offering the individual the freedom of personal expression. The main difference at that time between Cahiers and other film magazines was that Cahiers did not feel that opportunities of this kind were to be found exclusively in the European 'art' cinema. Right from the very earliest issues there are discussions of Hollywood directors such as Welles, Ford and Lang. Cahiers was concerned to raise not only the status of the cinema in general, but of American cinema in particular, by elevating its directors to the ranks of the artists.

The politique in the sense of a line that will be rigorously pursued and provocatively expressed, really dates from an article in issue no 31 by François Truffaut entitled *Une certaine tendance*
Truffaut attacks what he calls the tradition of quality in the French cinema, by which he means the films of directors such as Delannoy, Allégret and Autant-Lara, and especially the adaptations by Aurenche and Bost of well-known novels. They are attacked for being literary, not truly cinematic, and are also found guilty of 'psychological realism'. Truffaut defines a true film *auteur* as one who brings something genuinely personal to his subject instead of merely producing a tasteful, accurate but lifeless rendering of the original material. Examples of true *auteurs* are Bresson and Renoir. Instead of merely transferring someone else's work faithfully and self-effacingly, the *auteur* transforms the material into an expression of his own personality.

So successful was Truffaut's call to arms, and so many were the *auteurs* subsequently discovered, that in all the later articles in *Cahiers* in which the 'politique' was explicitly discussed, a great deal of space had to be devoted to dissociating the journal from the excesses committed in its name. (See, for example, issues nos 63, 70, 126, 172). Truffaut had referred only to French directors, but *Cahiers* began to give more and more space to the American cinema. In its special issue nos 150-1 on the American cinema no fewer than 120 cinéastes (ie auteurs) were identified.

Yet even by this late date (1964) the questions of what an *auteur* is and why the cinema should be discussed largely in terms of individual artists are ones that are only answered by implication. Clear articulations of a theory behind the practice are rare and sketchy. But a review by André Bazin of *The Red Badge of Courage* (no 27, p 49 f) gives a clue. Bazin distinguishes between Hitchcock, a true *auteur*, and Huston, who is only a *metteur en scène*, who has 'no truly personal style'. Huston merely adapts, though often very skilfully, the material given him, instead of transforming it into something genuinely his own. A similar point is made by Jacques Rivette in a later issue (no 126), in the course of a discussion on criticism. Rivette declares that Minnelli is not a true *auteur*, merely a talented director at the mercy of his script. With a bad script he makes a bad and uninteresting film. Fritz Lang, on the other hand, can somehow transform even indifferent material into something personal to him (and this, Rivette assumes, makes it interesting).

Such discussions, however, do not advance much beyond Truffaut's original position, though they serve to confirm *Cahiers*' stance on the issue of personal expression. Some attempt to modify this was made by Eric Rohmer. Rejecting the lunatic fringe who took the issue of personality to extremes, Rohmer writes, 'Le film est pour lui [the auteur] une architecture dont les pierres ne sont pas — ne doivent pas être — filles de sa propre chair.' The comparison with architecture, another industrial art, would seem to lead in a different direction from comparisons with literature, the best known of which is, of course, Alexandre Astruc's article
The Birth of a New Avant Garde: La Caméra-Stylo. But it was Astruc's article which was to prove more influential over the critics of Cahiers. The more Romantic conception of the director as the 'only begetter' of a film was the one that dominated the journal.

One expression of this which seems particularly indebted to Romantic artistic theory is that of Rivette in issue no 126: 'Un cinéaste, qui a fait dans le passé de très grands films, peut faire des erreurs, mais les erreurs qu'il fera ont toutes chances, a priori*, d'être plus passionantes que les réussites d'un confectionneur'.

What seems to lie behind such a statement is the notion of the 'divine spark' which separates off the artist from ordinary mortals, which divides the genius from the journeyman. All the articles by Truffaut, Bazin and Rivette from which I have quoted share this belief in the absolute distinction between auteur and metteur en scène, between cinéaste and 'confectionneur', and characterise it in terms of the difference between the auteur's ability to make a film truly his own, ie a kind of original, and the metteur en scène's inability to disguise the fact that the origin of his film lies somewhere else.

When this is compared with a statement from early Romantic literary theory, it is easy enough to see the derivation of this distinction:

'An Original may be said to be of a vegetable nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius; it grows, it is not made; Imitations are often a sort of manufacture, wrought up by those mechanics, art and labour, out of pre-existent materials not their own.'

It's not surprising, therefore, to find that auteur critics draw others of their assumptions from Romantic theorists. For example, Coleridge makes a distinction between two kinds of literature which makes use of the metaphor of organic unity contained in the above passage: 'The plays of Beaumont and Fletcher are mere aggregations without unity; in the Shakespearean drama there is a vitality which grows and evolves itself from within — a keynote which guides and controls the harmonies throughout.' This notion of the unity produced by the personality of the auteur is central to the Cahiers' position; but it is made even more explicit by their American apologist, Andrew Sarris: 'The auteur critic is obsessed with the wholeness of art and the artist. He looks at a film as a whole, a director as a whole. The parts, however entertaining individually, must cohere meaningfully.' The work of a metteur en scène will never be more than the sum of its parts, and probably less. The auteur's personality, on the other hand, endows his

* It's hard to see how this can be so a priori in any case; only according to the balance of probabilities.
work with organic unity. The belief that all directors must be either auteurs or metteurs en scène led inevitably to a kind of apartheid, according to which, as Rivette says, the failures of the auteurs will be more interesting than the successes of the rest. Another formulation of what is essentially the same distinction occurs in Cahiers no 172:

l'être doué du moindre talent esthétique, si sa personnalité 'éclate' dans l'oeuvre, l'emportera sur le technicien le plus avisé. Nous découvrons qu'il n'y pas de règles. L'intuition, la sensibilité, triomphent de toutes théories.8

Whether this zeal to divide directors into the company of the elect on the right and a company of the damned on the left owes anything to the Catholic influence in Cahiers is hard to say at this distance; but what can be identified, yet again, is the presence of Romantic artistic theory in the opposition of intuition and rules, sensibility and theory.

This tendency in Cahiers to make a totem of the personality of the auteur went to such extremes that every now and again the editors felt the need to redress the balance. Andre Bazin, writing in issue no 70, introduces a different perspective:

The evolution of Western art towards greater personalisation should definitely be considered as a step forward, but only so long as this individualisation remains only a final perfection and does not claim to define culture. At this point, we should remember that irrefutable commonplace we learnt at school: the individual transcends society, but society is also and above all within him. So there can be no definitive criticism of genius or talent which does not first take into consideration the social determinism, the historical combination of circumstances, and the technical background which to a large extent determines it.9

Bazin, as Rohmer had done before, takes up the analogy of architecture:

'If you will excuse yet another commonplace, the cinema is an art which is both popular and industrial. These conditions, which are necessary to its existence, in no way constitute a collection of hindrances — no more than in architecture — they rather represent a group of positive and negative circumstances which have to be reckoned with.'10

To be fair, Cahiers never entirely forgot these commonplaces, and quite frequently ran articles on the organisation of the film industry, on film genres (such as Bazin's own 'The Evolution of the Western' in December 1955) and on the technology of the cinema. The development of 'la politique des auteurs' into a cult of personality gathers strength with the emergence of Andrew Sarris, for it is Sarris who pushes to extremes arguments which in
Cahiers were often only implicit.

Sarris, for example, rejects Bazin’s attempt to combine the auteur approach with an acknowledgement of the forces conditioning the individual artist. Arguing strongly against any kind of historical determinism, Sarris states:

‘Even if the artist does not spring from the idealised head of Zeus, free of the embryonic stains of history, history itself is profoundly affected by his arrival. If we cannot imagine Griffith’s October or Eisenstein’s Birth of a Nation because we find it difficult to transpose one artist’s unifying conceptions of Lee and Lincoln to the other’s dialectical conceptions of Lenin and Kerensky, we are nevertheless compelled to recognise other differences in the personalities of these two pioneers beyond their respective cultural complexes. It is with these latter differences that the auteur theory is most deeply concerned. If directors and other artists cannot be wrenched from their historical environments, aesthetics is reduced to a subordinate branch of ethnography.’

(Pauline Kael is for once correct to write of this: ‘And when is Sarris going to discover that aesthetics is indeed a branch of ethnography; what does he think it is - a sphere of its own, separate from the study of man and his environment?’ But her own confusion re-emerges later in the same essay when she remarks, ‘Criticism is an art, not a science . . .’ Is ethnography, then, not a science?).

If Sarris is not saying that genius is independent of time and place, then he comes dangerously close to it. The critic’s task as he sees it is to scan the cinema for signs of ‘personality’, and having found them to mine the film so as to bring as much as possible of it to the surface. It is not his job to explain how it got there. He is canny enough to remain aware that his position is partly determined by the need to maintain a polemic, both against those who are contemptuous of the American cinema and against the crudities of ‘mass media critics’. (‘Auteur criticism is a reaction against sociological criticism that enthroned the what against the how.’ But this awareness does not save him from being driven further and further into an untenable position. That position is reached, I think, when he writes in his essay of 1962:

‘The second premise of the auteur theory is the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value. Over a group of films a director must exhibit certain recurring characteristics of style which serve as his signature.’ Here, surely, is a fatal flaw in Sarris’s argument, and the sleight of hand he uses to cover it cannot disguise its vulnerability. He is attempting to make the auteur theory perform two functions at the same time. On the one hand, it is a method of classification. Sarris talks elsewhere about the value of the theory as a way of ordering film history, or
a tool for producing a map of the cinema, and no-one could deny that in this sense the theory has, whatever its faults, been extremely productive, as a map should be, in opening up unexplored territory. But at the same time Sarris also requires the theory to act as a means of measuring value. Films, he is saying, become valuable insofar as they reveal directorial personality. He therefore does precisely what Bazin said should not be done: he uses individuality as a test of cultural value. It's worth noting that Sarris is not consistent in practising what he preaches, for several directors whose work undoubtedly exhibits a high degree of personality do not rank very far up the league tables of The American Cinema. Kazan, Wilder, Dassin, even Brian Forbes, all produce films easily recognisable as 'theirs' which are not rated by Sarris.

As one means, among others, of classifying films, the auteur theory has proved its usefulness. But to assert that personality is the criterion of value seems altogether more open to question. The assumption that individuality and originality are valuable in themselves is, as Bazin points out in 'La Politique des Auteurs', derived from Romantic artistic theory. Sarris goes further; the auteur theory values the personality of the director precisely because of the barriers to its expression. In Culture and Society Raymond Williams describes the way in which aesthetic theory came in the Romantic period to see the artist as essentially opposed to society, achieving personal expression in the face of a hostile environment and valuing it all the more for this. Sarris is directly in this tradition.

Sarris, like Cahiers before him, then uses this criterion of value as a means of raising the status of American cinema. He admits that in Hollywood there are pressures which might work against individual expression. But so there are elsewhere:

All directors, and not just in Hollywood, are imprisoned by the conditions of their craft and their culture. The reason foreign directors are almost invariably given more credit for creativity is that the local critic is never aware of all the influences operating in a foreign environment. The late Robert Warshow treated Carl Dreyer as a solitary artist and Leo McCarey as a social agent, but we know now that there were cultural influences in Denmark operating on Dreyer. Day of Wrath is superior by any standard to My Son John, but Dreyer is not that much freer an artist than McCarey. Dreyer's chains are merely less visible from our vantage point across the Atlantic. Taken at face value this is unexceptionable; of course no director has total freedom, and there is no reason a priori why American cinema should not be as good as any other. And in fact, says Sarris, it is better:

After years of tortured revaluation, I am now prepared to stake my critical reputation, such as it is, on the proposition that
Alfred Hitchcock is artistically superior to Robert Bresson by every criterion of excellence, and further that, film for film, the American cinema has been consistently superior to that of the rest of the world from 1915 through 1962. Consequently, I now regard the auteur theory primarily as a critical device for recording the history of the American cinema, the only cinema in the world worth exploring in depth beneath the frosting of a few great directors on top. 19

Again, this in itself is fair enough; the problem is that, having obtained our easy assent to the proposition that all film-makers are subject to conditions, he appears, by a sleight of hand, to proceed on the assumption that therefore conditions are unimportant. America can produce film artists, in just the same way as Europe, but more of them, and of a higher standard. Film history is for Sarris the history of auteurs. The acknowledgement of ‘conditions’ turns out to be mere lip service. And it is not, I think, difficult to see why: if personality is the criterion of value, and can be achieved in the face of ‘conditions’, then it is not the critic’s job to be much concerned with them.

One obvious objection to employing individuality as a test of value is that a director could well be highly individual, but a bad director. In the first edition of Signs and Meaning in the Cinema Peter Wollen does not seem wholly to avoid this trap. In the chapter on the auteur theory he writes:

My own view is that Ford’s work is much richer* than that of Hawkes and that this is revealed by a structural analysis; it is the richness of the shifting relations between antinomies in Ford’s work that makes him a great artist, beyond being simply an undoubted auteur. Moreover, the auteur theory enables us to reveal a whole complex of meaning in films such as Donovan’s Reef, which a recent filmography sums up as just ‘a couple of Navy men who have retired to a South Sea island now spend most of their time raising hell.’ 20

There is no doubt that films such as Donovan’s Reef, Wings of Eagles and especially The Sun Shines Bright (almost indecipherable to those unacquainted with Ford’s work) do reveal a great deal of meaning when seen in the context of Ford’s work as a whole. But does this make them ‘good’ films as well as interesting ones? The question is worth asking, because it seems to be just this smuggling in of one thing under the guise of another that is most responsible for the reputation in some quarters of the auteur theory as merely the secret password of an exclusive and fanatical sect.

Possibly people such as Pauline Kael who are roused to fury by * Possibly by ‘richer’ Wollen does not imply ‘has greater aesthetic value’; but if that is the case his terminology is a little confusing.
Sarris's version of the *auteur* theory should simply be left to stew in their own juice. And perhaps those who won't accept that *Wings of Eagles* is a good film have a very narrow concept of what is good and are unreasonable in demanding that all films should have formal perfection, should be 'intelligent', 'adult', etc. But the *auteur* theory becomes more tenable if in fact it is not required to carry in its baggage the burden of being an evaluative criterion. And Wollen, in the third edition of his book, dumps it along with much else:

At this point, it is necessary to say something about the *auteur* theory since this has often been seen as a way of introducing the idea of the creative personality into the Hollywood cinema. Indeed, it is true that many protagonists of the *auteur* theory do argue this way. However, I do not hold this view and I think it is important to detach the *auteur* theory from any suspicion that it simply represents a 'cult of personality' or apotheosis of the director. To my mind the *auteur* theory actually represents a radical break with the idea of an 'art' cinema, not the transplant of traditional ideas about art into Hollywood. The 'art' cinema is rooted in the idea of creativity and the film as the expression of an individual vision. What the *auteur* theory argues is that any film, certainly a Hollywood film, is a network of different statements, crossing and contradicting each other, elaborated into a final 'coherent' version. Like a dream, the film the spectator sees is, so to speak, the 'film facade', the end product of 'secondary revision', which hides and masks the process which remains latent in the film's 'unconscious'... by a process of comparison with other films, it is possible to decipher, not a coherent message or world-view, but a structure which underlies the film and shapes it, gives it a certain pattern of energy cathexis. It is this structure which *auteur* analysis disengages from the film.

The structure is associated with a single director, an individual, not because he has played the role of artist, expressing himself or his own vision in the film, but because it is through the force of his preoccupations that an unconscious, unintended meaning can be decoded in the film, usually to the surprise of the individual concerned... It is wrong, in the name of a denial of the traditional idea of creative subjectivity, to deny any status to individuals at all. But Fuller or Hawks or Hitchcock, the directors, are quite separate from 'Fuller' or 'Hawks' or 'Hitchcock', the structures named after them, and should not be methodologically confused.21

* The virtual obsession with aesthetic – even moral – evaluation which has characterised so much British criticism undoubtedly gave the *auteur* theory much of its appeal. (It's hard to ascribe moral value to say, the studio system.)
Wollen does not claim that this is a total theory of the cinema. Auteur theory cannot simply be applied indiscriminately. Nor does an auteur analysis exhaust what can be said about any single film. It does no more than provide one way of decoding a film, by specifying what its mechanics are at one level. There are other kinds of code that could be proposed, and whether they are of any value or not will have to be settled by reference to the text, to the films in question.

There is much in this position that is attractive. It satisfies our sense that on the one hand the American cinema is the richest field for study, and on the other hand that the more one knows about its habitual methods of working the less it becomes possible to conceive of Hollywood as populated by autonomous geniuses. And certainly a priori evidence suggests that the themes of transferred guilt in Hitchcock, of home, and the desert/garden antithesis in Ford, for example, are almost entirely unconscious, making it inappropriate to speak, as so much auteur criticism does, about a director's world view (and especially about the moral worth of that world view). And the avoidance of the problem of evaluation is surely justified until we have an adequate description of what we should evaluate.

Structural analysis of auteurs has produced important results, not least in Wollen's own book. Yet there are surely problems in using techniques which were developed for the analysis of forms of communications which are entirely unconscious such as dreams, myths and language itself. For what is the exact relation between the structure called 'Hitchcock' and the film director called Hitchcock, who actually makes decisions about the story, the acting, the sets, the camera placing? It is possible to reveal structures in Hitchcock's work which are by no means entirely unconscious, such as the use of certain camera angles to involve and implicate the audience in the action. Hitchcock remarks about The Wrong Man:

The whole approach is subjective. For instance, they've slipped on a pair of handcuffs to link him to another prisoner. During the journey between the station house and the prison, there are different men guarding him, but since he's ashamed, he keeps his head down, staring at his shoes, so we never show the guards.

This kind of thing occurs in almost all Hitchcock's films, and so could be said to identify him as an auteur in the traditional sense. But it also connects to his obsessional and no doubt largely unconscious (till he read about it) concern with guilt and voyeurism, which have been revealed in structural analysis.

Earlier versions of the auteur theory made the assumption that because there was meaning in a work someone must have deliberately put it there, and that someone must be the auteur.
Wollen rightly resists that. But this doesn’t mean that one can only talk about unconscious structures (admittedly Wollen does say it is wrong to deny any status to individuals at all, but is there not something a little disingenuous in this concession?). The conscious will and talent of the artist (for want of a better word) may still be allowed some part, surely. But of course, that conscious will and talent are also in turn the product of those forces that act upon the artist, and it is here that traditional auteur theory most seriously breaks down. As Sam Rohdie says:

Auteurs are out of time. The theory which makes them sacred makes no inroad on vulgar history, has no concepts for the social or the collective, or the national.

The primary act of auteur criticism is one of dissociation – the auteur out of time and history and society is also freed from any productive process, be it in Los Angeles or Paris.24

The test of a theory is whether it produces new knowledge. The auteur theory produced much, but of a very partial kind, and much it left totally unknown. What is needed now is a theory of the cinema that locates directors in a total situation, rather than one which assumes that their development has only an internal dynamic. This means that we should jettison such loaded terms as ‘organic’, which inevitably suggest that a director’s work derives its impetus from within. All such terms reveal often unformulated and always unwarranted assumptions about the cinema; a film is not a living creature, but a product brought into existence by the operation of a complex of forces upon a body of matter. Unfortunately, criticism which deals with only one aspect of the artistic object is easier to practice than that which seeks to encompass the totality. Three approaches seem possible, and each of them must inevitably squeeze out the auteur from his position of prominence, and transform the notion of him which remains. First, there is the examination of the effects of the cinema on society (research into the sociology of mass media, and so on). Second is the effect of society on the cinema; in other words, the operation of ideology, economics, technology, etc. Lastly, and this is in a sense only a sub-section of the preceding category, the effects of films on other films; this would especially involve questions of genre, which only means that some films have a very close relation to other films. But all films are affected by the previous history of the cinema. This is only one more thing that traditional auteur theory could not cope with. It identified the code of the auteur; but was silent on those codes intrinsic to the cinema, as well as to those originating outside it.

Notes
1. Film Culture, no 27 (Winter 1962-3). Reprinted in Perspectives on the Study of Film, editor John Stuart Katz, Boston 1971 (p 129)
Sarris later conceded, ‘Ultimately, the auteur theory is not so much
a theory as an attitude, a table of values that converts film history into directorial biography.' The American Cinema (New York, 1968) p 30.

2. 'For the auteur, the film is a piece of architecture whose bricks are not – must not be – the children of his own body.' Cahiers du Cinéma, no 63, p 55.


4. 'A cinéaste who has made great films in the past may make mistakes, but his mistakes will have every chance of being, a priori, more impressive than the successes of a "manufacturer".' Cahiers, no 126, p 17. The same idea is to be found in Sarris, in The American Cinema, p 17: 'the worst film of a great director may be more interesting than the best film of a fair to middling director.'


8. Cahiers, no 172, p 3 'a man endowed with the least aesthetic talent, if his personality "shines out" in the work, will be more successful than the cleverest technician. We discover that there are no rules. Intuition and sensibility triumph over all theories.'


10. Ibid.


15. Sarris, in Katz, op cit, p 137.


17. See Williams, op cit, pp 48-64, and passim.


22. Ibid, p 168.
